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Art Therapy in Patients with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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Abstract

Art has always been more than an aesthetic tool; it has served as a medium for expressing suffering, facilitating psychological healing, and reconstructing individuals' lived experiences. Among individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), verbalizing traumatic experiences is often challenging. Consequently, the language of images, colors, and creative expression can provide a meaningful avenue for revealing the hidden dimensions of psychological distress. The present study employed a qualitative approach using the Grounded Theory methodology to explore the lived experiences of individuals with PTSD who participated in painting therapy and color therapy. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The findings indicated that, for the participants, art was not merely a creative activity but rather functioned as a safe space for expressing repressed memories, facilitating emotional release, and reconstructing the meaning of traumatic experiences. The core category that emerged from the analysis was "reconstructing the self through imagery", which was organized around themes including emotional release, the restoration of a sense of control, experiencing calmness through engagement with color, rebuilding a trauma-affected identity, and fostering hope for the future. Participants reported that the process of creating images and interacting with colors contributed to a reduction in anxiety, a decrease in the intensity of intrusive traumatic recollections, and an overall improvement in psychological well-being. The findings of this study suggest that painting therapy and color therapy can serve not merely as therapeutic interventions, but as artistic and meaning-making experiences that facilitate the psychological healing of individuals with PTSD. Within this process, suffering is transformed into imagery, and imagery, in turn, becomes a means of reconstructing one's life.

Keywords: Post-traumatic stress disorder, Painting therapy, Color therapy, Psychological healing, Reconstruction of self.

1 | Introduction

Trauma is not merely an event that occurred in the past; rather, it is an experience that continues to exist within an individual's memory, body, and imagination [1]. Individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) frequently experience the recurrent return of distressing images, emotions, and memories that are often difficult to articulate through language. In many cases, traumatic experiences manifest first as images,

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colors, symbols, and emotions before they can be translated into words. From this perspective, art can serve as an alternative language for expressing those dimensions of human experience that lie beyond the reach of verbal narratives [1]. Over the past few decades, art therapy has gained increasing recognition as an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of art and mental health. This approach is founded on the premise that the process of creating artwork can provide a safe space for the expression of emotions, the representation of memories, and the reconstruction of traumatic experiences [2]. Among the various modalities of art therapy, painting therapy and color therapy occupy a particularly important position, as they enable individuals to express repressed emotions, fears, and inner conflicts through form, line, texture, and color without the need for direct verbal expression. Within this process, the artwork is not merely an aesthetic product; rather, it represents a manifestation of the individual's lived experience and serves as a medium for reflecting upon and reconstructing that experience. The present study employs a qualitative approach and the Grounded Theory methodology to examine the experiences of individuals with PTSD who participated in painting therapy and color therapy sessions. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews with participants who had experienced involvement in this therapeutic artistic process. The primary aim of the study is to understand how visual elements and the process of artistic creation influence individuals' experiences of psychological recovery, as well as to identify shared meaning patterns within their narratives. This research seeks to demonstrate how art can transcend the level of a creative activity and become a medium for psychological healing, identity reconstruction, and the re-creation of meaning following traumatic experiences. In this context, qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced PTSD indicate that engagement with the art therapy process was not merely a technical therapeutic intervention, but rather was perceived as a lived and multidimensional experience. In their narratives, participants repeatedly emphasized the role of painting and color as tools for "externalizing the inexpressible inner experiences"; in this way, the creation of images enabled a safe distance from painful memories and allowed them to observe those memories in a more tolerable form [3]. This experience was accompanied in many narratives by feelings of calmness, a reduction in emotional tension, and a gradual restoration of a sense of control over the body and mind. Such findings suggest that art functions not only as a therapeutic tool but also as an intermediary space between suffering and psychological reconstruction, a space in which the traumatic experience is transformed from a raw and fragmented state into a structure that can be narrated and endowed with meaning.

2|Art Therapy as a Therapeutic Approach in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Despite the expansion of evidence-based approaches in the treatment of PTSD, significant limitations remain in the exclusive use of verbally oriented interventions, particularly in cases where the traumatic experience has reached a level of emotional intensity that makes linguistic access to it difficult or even impossible. Under such circumstances, art therapy, as a complementary approach, provides an opportunity to access the pre-verbal layers of experience [3]; These are layers in which images, colors, and the movement of the hand across the canvas replace linear and verbal narratives. This characteristic has enabled art therapy to establish an interdisciplinary position within the field of trauma treatment, situated at the intersection of clinical psychology and the visual arts. In many contemporary approaches to art therapy, greater emphasis is placed on the "creative process" rather than the "final product". In other words, what occurs throughout the process of painting or working with colors, from the selection of colors to the manner in which an individual interacts with the canvas, is regarded as meaningful data for understanding the person's emotional state. Studies have demonstrated that this process can lead to a reduction in physiological arousal, enhancement of emotional regulation, and the creation of a safe distance between the individual and traumatic memories. Within this context, colors are viewed not merely as aesthetic elements but as carriers of meaning and emotion that enable the indirect representation of lived experiences [3]. From the perspective of contemporary trauma theories, including approaches based on body memory and multimodal processing of experience, art can serve as a mediating link among the body, emotions, and narrative. Within this framework, painting therapy and color

therapy are regarded not only as tools for emotional expression but also as mechanisms for reorganizing the fragmented experience of trauma [4]. For this reason, considering art therapy in the context of PTSD is not merely limited to viewing it as an auxiliary technique; rather, it is regarded as an independent meaning-making domain in which psychological reconstruction becomes possible through the visual re-creation of experience [3].

3 | Research Methodology: From In-Depth Interviews to Theoretical Saturation in Grounded Theory

The present study was designed and conducted using a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory methodology. The primary aim of this section is to understand the process of the lived experiences of individuals with PTSD in their engagement with painting therapy and color therapy. Research data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 participants diagnosed with PTSD. Participants were selected purposively, based on their direct experiences of trauma and their involvement in art therapy processes. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that, in the final interviews, no new data emerged that contributed to the development of additional concepts or codes, and recurring patterns within the narratives became evident. This stage indicated the adequacy of the sampling process and the sufficient depth of data required for qualitative analysis. Throughout the interviews, emphasis was placed on participants' lived experiences, trauma-related emotions, and the role of painting and color in emotional regulation and the processing of traumatic memories. Following data collection, the analysis was conducted based on the coding stages of Grounded Theory, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout this process, initial concepts were extracted from the participants' narratives and were subsequently organized into subcategories and, ultimately, a core category. This analysis led to the development of a set of codes and themes that reflected the role of art in psychological reconstruction and the experience of healing following trauma.

Table 1. Example of open coding in art therapy interviews with individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Conceptualization	Initial Codes (Open Codes)	Selected Excerpts from Participants' Statements
Emotional release through art	Emotional release and reduction of psychological distress	When I was painting, I felt as if a weight had been lifted off me; the pressure in my chest began to ease
An alternative language for traumatic experience	Nonverbal expression of trauma	I couldn't talk about what had happened, but I could paint it
Color as a regulator of emotion	Emotional regulation through color-induced calmness	Bright colors calmed me; it felt as though my mind had finally gone quiet
Restoration of psychological control	Enhanced sense of control and agency	When I was painting, I felt that I had regained a sense of control over myself
Safe observation of trauma	Cognitive distancing	The images helped me look at my memories from a distance
Psychological reconstruction	Psychological healing and inner recovery	After painting, I felt that something within me had begun to heal
Reduction of clinical symptoms	Reduction of PTSD symptoms	Painting reduced the frequency of my nightmares
Color as the language of emotion	Emotional externalization through color	With each color, I felt I was releasing a different emotion
Reconstruction of the meaning of trauma	Increased tolerability of traumatic memories	Painting made my past feel more bearable

Restoration of hope	Hope and future reconstruction	Painting made my past feel more bearable

Table 2. Axial coding of art therapy experiences among individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Paradigm Component	Categories	Subcategories	Analytical Description
Causal conditions	Experience of trauma	Intrusive memories, nightmares, and chronic anxiety	Initiates the need for art-based intervention
Central phenomenon	Nonverbal representation of trauma through art	Painting as an alternative language and color as a carrier of emotion	Represents the core of the participants' experience
Contextual conditions	Limitations of language and verbal expression	Inability to talk about the traumatic event and emotional silence	Facilitates engagement in artistic expression
Intervening conditions	Therapeutic support and a safe environment	Therapist presence, a nonjudgmental environment, and continuity of therapy sessions	Facilitates or constrains the therapeutic process
Action/interaction strategies	Use of color and imagery for emotional regulation	Selection of specific colors, free painting, and collage	Active coping strategies in response to trauma
Action/interaction strategies	Distancing from the traumatic experience	External observation of trauma and reconstruction of traumatic imagery	Reduces the emotional intensity of traumatic memories
Consequences	Psychological recovery and identity reconstruction	Reduced anxiety, enhanced sense of control, and restoration of hope	Outcomes of the art therapy experience

4 | Explication of the Core Category

Re-creating the self through imagery: Data analysis indicates that the experiences of individuals with PTSD throughout the processes of painting therapy and color therapy are organized around a single core category [5]. The transformation of the raw and chaotic experience of trauma into a visual structure that is observable and reconstructable [6]. In this process, the individual not only externalizes their suppressed emotions but also gradually shifts from a state of "being immersed in the memory" to a state of "observing the memory". This shift in position enables the individual to redefine their relationship with the traumatic past. Within this framework, the artistic image is not merely a reflection of experience; rather, it becomes a tool for the reorganization of the psyche [7]. Through color, form, and symbolism, participants can reconstruct an experience that was previously inexpressible and fragmented into a meaningful form. This reconstruction provides the foundation for reducing PTSD symptoms, enhancing the sense of control, and fostering a new form of identity coherence. Ultimately, in this study, art therapy emerges not merely as an auxiliary technique, but as a "meaning-making" process through which psychological suffering is translated into the language of imagery, enabling the rewriting of lived experience [8].

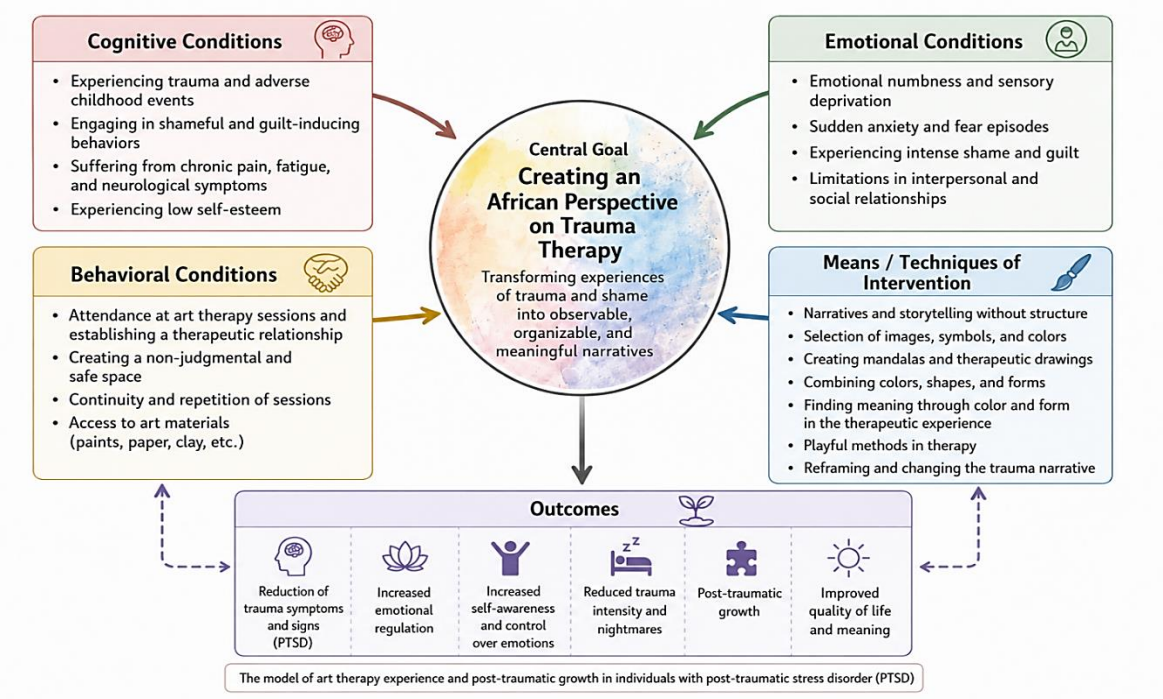


Fig. 1. Model of art therapy and post-traumatic growth in PTSD patients from an African perspective.

This model demonstrates that art therapy in individuals with PTSD is not a linear therapeutic process; rather, it is an interactive cycle in which "trauma" enters a process of representation through "nonverbal artistic expression" and ultimately leads to "identity and meaning reconstruction" [9]. In this process, imagery and color serve as mediating elements that transform the traumatic experience from a raw emotional state into one that is observable, interpretable, and reparable [10].

5 | Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the experience of art therapy among individuals with PTSD extends beyond a mere therapeutic intervention and functions as a process of meaning reconstruction and aesthetic transformation of the traumatic experience. The core category of "re-creating the self through imagery" demonstrates that, through painting and interaction with colors, individuals not only achieve emotional release but also gradually establish a new relationship with traumatic memories; a relationship in which the memory is transformed from an internally threatening experience into an image that can be observed and reinterpreted. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives related to multimodal trauma processing, which emphasize the role of visual and bodily memory in the consolidation of traumatic experiences. Within this framework, art functions as a mediator between the body, emotion, and cognition, facilitating the reorganization of fragmented experiences. Participants in this study repeatedly indicated that the process of creating artwork helped them transition from a state of "being immersed in the memory" to a state of "observing the memory from the outside". This shift can be considered a key mechanism in reducing the severity of PTSD symptoms. From an artistic perspective, the findings of this study indicate that color and imagery are not merely tools for emotional expression; rather, they function as carriers of meaning and organizers of lived experience. The selection of specific colors, the repetition of visual patterns, and the creation of personal symbols all reflect individuals' efforts to rewrite experiences of suffering in a form that is more tolerable and more open to narration. In this context, the aesthetic quality of the artwork is of secondary importance; what occupies the central position is the creative process itself and the individual's inner experience during the act of creation. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the role of art therapy as an interdisciplinary approach that redefines the boundaries between psychological treatment and artistic experience. Within this context, art therapy is not merely a tool for symptom reduction; rather, it serves as a platform for meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and the re-creation of the individual's self-narrative after trauma. This narrative emerges through imagery, color, and silence, and gradually returns to the language of life.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical considerations.

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Consent for Publication

The participant(s) provided informed consent for the anonymous use of their interview data in scientific publication. The author has reviewed and approved the final manuscript and consented to its publication.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the institutional guidelines governing research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their personal information.

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